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# North Korea's Abduction of Japanese Citizens and the Six-Party Talks

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# Summary

The admission by North Korea in 2002 that it abducted several Japanese nationals—most of them nearly 30 years ago—continues to affect significantly the Six-Party Talks on North Korea's nuclear weapons program. This report provides background information on the abductee issue, summarizes its effect on Japanese politics, analyzes its impact on U.S.-Japan relations, and assesses its regional implications. Congress has indicated considerable interest in the abductions issue. The North Korean Human Rights Act (P.L. 108-333) includes a sense of the Congress that non-humanitarian aid be contingent on North Korean progress in accounting for the Japanese abductees. A House hearing in April 2006 focused on North Korea's abductions of foreign citizens, with testimony from former abductees and their relatives. Some Members of Congress have sponsored legislation (S.Res. 399 and H.R. 3650) that support Japan's call for settlement of the abductions controversy before North Korea is removed from the U.S. state sponsors of terrorism list. This report will be updated as events warrant.

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The forcible seizure of Japanese citizens by North Korean agents in the 1970s and 1980s continues to be a pivotal issue in the ongoing Six-Party Talks on North Korea's nuclear weapons program. Tokyo's participation in the international forum is dominated by its efforts to achieve progress on the abduction issue. While the United States is now aggressively pursuing a deal that provides energy and economic assistance to North Korea in exchange for the dismantlement of its nuclear weapons program, Japan has refused to contribute aid without satisfactory progress on the kidnappings. This had led to Japan's relative isolation in the multilateral talks, although better relations between new leaders in Japan and South Korea may provide some flexibility to end the impasse.

U.S. interest in the abductions issue is driven by its needs for Japan's diplomatic and economic assistance in the negotiations, as well as concerns that friction in the U.S.-Japan relationship will damage one of the United States' most important alliances in the world.[1] U.S. negotiators maintain that they strongly support Japan's position on the abductees, but also indicate that the issue will not block a nuclear deal. This stance contrasts with the pre-2007 approach of the Bush Administration, in which the abductions issue provided a platform for Tokyo and Washington's strategic priorities to converge. In the earlier Six-Party Talks, the United States and Japan joined to pressure North Korea on not only nuclear weapons, but also on human rights, refugees, and the abductions.

The next several months are likely to be decisive for how the abductions issue will affect the U.S.-Japan relationship. Foremost is how progress in the Six-Party Talks proceeds: if time pressure and proliferation concerns lead the Bush Administration to accept a nuclear deal with North Korea that does not appear to enhance Japanese security, leaders in Tokyo may find it difficult to convince their citizens to steadfastly support U.S. strategic interests, including military basing. However, amid some indications that Tokyo may be reconsidering its priorities in the negotiations, a deal that extracts significant concessions from Pyongyang could reinforce the fundamentally strong U.S.-Japan alliance.

# Background

In the 1980s and 1990s, circumstantial evidence began to surface that North Korean agents were responsible for the disappearance of several Japanese citizens. Isolated press reports addressed the suspicion, but the Japanese government initially dismissed the accounts and reacted slowly to the allegations. As Tokyo moved to re-establish diplomatic relations with Pyongyang in the early 1990s, some Japanese politicians saw the issue as a possible obstacle to normalization, and may have suppressed information that suggested North Korea's responsibility.[2] Unconfirmed reports from North Korean defectors emerged that Japanese nationals were held by North Korea, but the mainstream media largely ignored them.

Then, in 1996, an article appeared in which a North Korean defector spoke about his experience at a "spy school" where native Japanese trained agents in Japanese language and culture. Support groups for the victims' families formed in Japan, and politicians—particularly those opposed to negotiating with Pyongyang—mobilized support in the Diet (parliament). In 1998, Pyongyang's test of an intermediate-range ballistic missile over Japan raised security fears about the threat from North Korea and made the general Japanese public more suspicious of its behavior.

[1] For more information, see CRS Report RL33436, *Japan-U.S. Relations: Issues for Congress*, coordinated by Emma Chanlett-Avery, and CRS Report RL33740, *The Changing U.S.-Japan Alliance: Implications for U.S. Interests*, by Emma Chanlett-Avery.

[2] Johnston, Eric. "The North Korea Abduction Issue and Its Effect on Japanese Domestic Politics," Japan Policy Research Institute. *JPRI Working Paper No. 101* (June 2004).

Eventually, the kidnappings became part of the diplomatic agenda with North Korea and, in September 2002, Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi traveled to Pyongyang to "resolve" the abductions issue and move toward normalizing relations.

At the 2002 summit, North Korean leader Kim Jong-il admitted to and apologized for North Korean agents' abduction of 13 Japanese citizens. The kidnappings took place in Japan and Europe between 1977 and 1983. He claimed that only five remained alive.[3] The Japanese public, shocked at the revelations, became fixated on the drama, with attention reaching its height a month later when the five abductees were returned to Japan. In May 2004, Koizumi returned to Pyongyang to secure the release of five of the abductees' children.[4] Coverage of the abductees saturated the press, and the issue quickly became the top priority in Japan's North Korea policy.

Given North Korea's record of truculence and denial, many analysts expressed surprise that Kim Jong-il admitted the kidnappings and allowed the abductees and their families to return to Japan. However, when Tokyo pressed for proof of the remaining abductees' deaths, Pyongyang produced apparently forged death certificates and traffic accident reports. When asked for physical evidence, North Korean officials provided cremated human remains that most Japanese felt to be of dubious origin (see below) and also claimed that some remains were washed away in floods. The inconsistency and apparent deception compounded the Japanese public's anger at North Korea and reinforced the views of many conservative politicians that Pyongyang should not be trusted. Because of the shaky evidence, Tokyo determined that its policy would be based on the premise that all the remaining abductees are alive.

# The Effect of the Abductions on Japan's Political Landscape

As the abductee drama has played out, three Japanese prime ministers have navigated the issue in subtly different ways, though always mindful of the emotional reaction of the public. Koizumi's bold initiative to visit Pyongyang in 2002 brought the issue to the surface, although he may not have anticipated the strong response from the public. Koizumi's position toward North Korea gradually hardened as the public's criticism of North Korea swelled and the Bush Administration indicated a reluctance to aggressively pursue a negotiated settlement with Pyongyang. His successor, Shinzo Abe, rose to prominence based on his hardline position toward North Korea, specifically on the kidnappings. Upon taking office, Abe established a headquarters in the Cabinet Secretariat to coordinate abductee affairs; led efforts to impose international and unilateral sanctions and restrictions when North Korea tested missiles and a nuclear device in 2006; and called for the immediate return and safety of all the abductees, on the assumption that all were still alive. Since assuming the premiership in 2007, Yasuo Fukuda has stated his interest in re-engaging more actively in the Six-Party Talks, but has not indicated that he will adjust Japan's policy on the abductees. Advocacy groups for the abductees note that he has retained the office that Abe created, but voice some doubt that his stance will mirror Abe's approach.

[3] Koizumi had presented a list of 13 names of suspected abductees, of which the North Korean side said eight had died, four were alive, and one never entered North Korea. They also confirmed that one abductee not on the list was alive. Since then, the Japanese government has added three more names to the list, for a total of 17 abductees.

[4] One return abductee's husband, Charles Jenkins, and two children did not return to Japan with the others. Jenkins, an American soldier who defected to North Korea in 1965, feared facing desertion charges from the U.S. military if he came to Japan. Japanese officials arranged for the family to reunite in Indonesia, and eventually for all four of them to come to Japan in July 2004. Turning himself into U.S. authorities, Jenkins served a 25-day sentence at a U.S. naval base in Japan. In November 2004, he was released and joined his family in northern Japan.

Due to the overwhelming public reaction, there has been little open opposition to the official policy on the abductions. Opposition political parties have not challenged the ruling party's orthodoxy on the issue, and politicians from all parties have formed special Diet committees to indicate their support for the victims. Advocacy groups have gained particular clout as the controversy grew: the Association of the Families of Victims Kidnapped by North Korea, made up exclusively of relatives of the abducted, have become major media figures. Other groups of conservative activists, some explicitly committed to regime change in Pyongyang, have elevated their political influence and public profile.[5] Among the most active of these are the National Association for the Rescue of Japanese Kidnapped by North Korea (NARKN).

# The Yokota Case

As with many popular movements, the outrage over the abductees' fates has a powerful poster child. Megumi Yokota was only 13 years old when she was reportedly snatched by North Korean agents on her way home from school. North Korean officials claimed that she committed suicide in 1993. Her case had drawn widespread media attention, both domestically and internationally, as the subject of documentaries and even an American folk song. As leaders of the Association of the Families of Victims Kidnapped by North Korea and in frequent media appearances, Yokota's parents have become the face of the abductee cause. In 2006, President Bush invited the Yokotas to the White House, later calling the encounter "one of the most moving meetings since I've been the president." Earlier that day, Yokota's mother testified in front of a House Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific and Subcommittee on Africa, Global Human Rights and International Operations joint hearing.

Because of Yokota's high profile, any progress or setbacks to resolve her case is of particular symbolic importance. The public reacted with outrage when North Korea provided what they claimed were her cremated human remains to Japan, only to have Japanese officials later announce that they were not Yokota's.[6] At the 2002 summit, North Korea relayed that Yokota had a fifteen-year-old daughter. A reunion of Yokota's parents with their granddaughter has been floated as a possible path to reconciliation, and observers maintain that any settlement of the Yokota case would make a significant impact on the public perception of the issue.

# The Abductions Issue in the Six-Party Talks

## U.S.-Japanese Tension

As the Bush Administration has moved aggressively to reach a deal on denuclearization with North Korea in the Six-Party Talks since early 2007, distance has emerged between Washington and Tokyo. Japanese officials have expressed alarm that the United States may remove North Korea from its list of state sponsors of terrorism.[7] The removal, considered likely by many analysts, is one of a series of phased actions agreed to in the Six-Party Talks in exchange for Pyongyang allowing the disablement of the Yongbyon reactor and providing a declaration of

[5] *Japan and North Korea: Bones of Contention*, International Crisis Group Report. June 2005.

[6] Controversy over the remains ensued, with scientific laboratories providing conflicting reports on the DNA analysis. The science journal *Nature* published an article questioning the integrity of the analysis performed by one of the labs in which one of the forensic experts who tested the remains said he could not rule out that the samples had become contaminated and therefore incapable of producing accurate results. See *Nature*, Volume 433-434, February-April 2005.

[7] For more information, see CRS Report RL30613, *North Korea: Terrorism List Removal*, by Larry A. Niksch.

nuclear programs. In the past, U.S. leaders have linked North Korea's inclusion on the list to the abduction issue, although State Department officials reportedly claim that the issue is not a legal obstacle for removal. In December 2007, the Committee on Abduction of Japanese Citizens by North Korea of Japan's Lower House adopted a resolution urging the United States to refrain from "de-listing" North Korea. The resolution read, in part, "We are concerned that if North Korea is removed from the list without repatriation of the detained victims, the Japan-U.S. alliance will be adversely affected and the Japanese people will be greatly disappointed."

A U.S. decision to delist North Korea is unlikely to shake the foundations of the fundamentally strong alliance, but Japanese analysts say that the U.S.-Japan relationship could suffer in the short-term if Washington accepts a weak deal. If the Japanese public views Washington as abandoning the abductees, Japanese leaders may have difficulty convincing their public to continue to support the United States on a range of strategic interests, including the hosting and realignment of U.S. military bases in Japan. If, however, the government can point to enhanced Japanese security because of North Korean concessions on disarmament, the public may be more accepting, particularly if the United States continues to press Pyongyang for more information on the kidnappings.

## Japan-North Korean Bilateral Talks

One of the five working groups established by the breakthrough February 13, 2007 agreement in the Six-Party Talks is dedicated to resolving Tokyo's and Pyongyang's bilateral controversies.[8] The agreement states that the working group will hold talks to work toward the normalization of relations on the basis of settlement of "outstanding issues of concern," a phrase interpreted to mean the abductions and compensation to North Korea for Japan's colonial rule of the Korean peninsula from 1910-1945. Two rounds of consultations in Vietnam and Mongolia yielded no major progress on the stalemate. Only one other working group is dedicated to strictly bilateral issues (the U.S.-North Korean normalization process), which some say indicates the high priority of the abduction issue. On the other hand, relegation of the abductions to a separate track could demonstrate a willingness to move the rest of the process forward without satisfactory resolution of the kidnappings.

## Prospects for a Change in Tokyo's Policy

Although the issue remains politically sensitive in Japan, many commentators acknowledge some degree of "abductee fatigue" among the Japanese public. Government officials and influential opinion leaders also privately voice concern that the abductee issue has led to Japan's marginalization in the multilateral negotiations on North Korea's nuclear weapons program. The combination of fears of diplomatic isolation and concern about a range of security threats from North Korea may lead the defense establishment and policy elite to support any shift or adjustment to the current policy on North Korea.

Fukuda's reputation as a pragmatist who places special emphasis on developing closer ties with Asian nations suggests that he would be amenable to a compromise approach to North Korea, particularly if Pyongyang indicated any movement on the issue. In addition, his rhetoric when speaking about Japan's interests in North Korea signifies a shift from Abe's singular focus on the abductions issue: Fukuda describes the kidnappings as one of three areas of concern, the others

[8] For more information, see CRS Report RL33590, *North Korea's Nuclear Weapons Development and Diplomacy*, by Larry A. Niksch.

being Pyongyang's nuclear and missile programs. However, Fukuda's tenuous hold on power and the threatened collapse of his ruling party have precluded any serious foreign policy initiatives.

# The Abductions Issue and Regional Relations

Since the Six-Party talks began, Tokyo's focus on the abductions issue has isolated it from the other parties, particularly China and South Korea. Some critics say that the abductions issue allows Japan to play the victim while refusing to take responsibility for its own historical offenses, particularly in the World War II era.[9] Thorny historical controversies between Japan and its neighbors, however, have showed significant signs of easing in the past few years. After a period of rocky relations under Koizumi, Abe and Fukuda made strides in warming ties with Seoul and Beijing.

Amid an overall detente in Sino-Japanese relations, Fukuda visited China in January 2008. When asked about the abductions issue during the visit, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao reportedly stated that "we understand Japan's position, and we are confident that a resolution can be reached through dialogue." New South Korean President Lee Myung-bak has stated explicitly that he does not intend to press Japan to apologize for historical grievances as his predecessor did. In his capacity of a Special Envoy, Lee's brother, who is also the vice speaker of South Korea's National Assembly, reportedly told Japanese officials that the new leader "understands and supports" Japan's position on the abductee issue. Lee has also indicated that he is more willing to raise human rights issues with the North than his predecessor.

Most observers think it is unlikely that Chinese or South Korean negotiators will actively champion the abductees' cause, but both capitals appear to recognize the need for Japanese involvement (and funding) in any diplomatic arrangement with North Korea. Optimistic observers say that new leadership in Tokyo and Seoul, combined with Beijing's interest in maintaining smooth relations before the 2008 Summer Olympics and the Bush Administration's determination to reach a negotiated agreement this year, provide an environment ripe for a breakthrough.

## Author Information

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[9] *Japan and North Korea: Bones of Contention*, International Crisis Group Report. June 2005.

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